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HUMAN PLUS TACKLES THE CHILKOOT TRAIL

by James Akenhead, EdD

James and Charlene Akenhead are career educators with fascinating avocations. They breed and train Alaskan malamutes and frequently attend sled dog races such as the world-famous Iditarod. Charlene is an avid student of Alaskan history, culture, and legend. In June 2000, Charlene, Jim, and two friends hiked the Chilkoot Gold Rush Trail from Skagway, Alaska, to Lake Bennett in British Columbia, Canada. The Chilkoot, billed as “the thirty-three meanest miles in history,” is guaranteed to satisfy the strongest taste for extreme adventure!

Background

The Chilkoot Trail has changed little since 1898, when over 30,000 gold rush stampeders (many of them inadequately provisioned) attempted to cross the fearsome mountain pass. Thousands of people and 3,000 pack animals perished. Backpackers still come from as far away as England and Germany to experience the trail’s mystery. Charlene and I are in our late fifties, and we trained rigorously during the winter and spring for the five-day trek. Each of our forty- to fifty-pound packs contained food, tents, clothing, and other essentials. We had to obtain a permit from United States and Canadian rangers and file a daily plan that included four camps used by the stampeders of yesteryear. Because the entire trail was in bear country, a required pre-hike lecture emphasized that “a fed bear is a dead bear.” Packs were to be kept within arm’s reach, and we were to stay together at all times.

The first quarter-mile, all of it uphill, took an hour. Once the trail leveled off, we found ourselves walking in a northern rain forest for the next seven miles. The second morning saw us scrambling up and over stones and tree roots and through narrow passages. We barely glanced at rushing creeks, waterfalls, and the profusion of wildflowers while walking. The priority was avoiding disastrous missteps.



For our shot at the summit on the third day, we were under way by 4 A.M. The first stretch was deceptively easy. Then the trail started climbing: over rocks and roots, around boulders, through streams, past waterfalls, and alongside sheer drop-offs. Not only was the route to the summit steep, but the lower part was all huge boulders. After pulling, pushing, and praying our way up, in constant fear of getting a foot caught or starting a rockslide onto those below, we reached a false summit and could see the next 500 feet—all snow. We reached the summit and checked in with the Canadian ranger at the border by noon. After a short rest and a snack, we pressed forward again. The sky was blue, the snowfields sparkled in the sun, and a sign warned, “Do not stop.” This was an avalanche area, and we walked 150 feet apart and attempted to move quietly and quickly. The soft snow had other ideas. We struggled onward, sinking in with each step. After twelve and a half hours, we finally reached the cabin and rustic outhouse at Happy Camp, almost too exhausted to eat. Snowcapped mountains graced both sides of the river, and songbirds sang cheerfully. In the cabin’s guest book one man had written, “WHAT THE @#%& WAS I THINKING?” We all agreed.

The next day, supposedly an “easy” eight miles, was the exact opposite. In some places partially melted snow bridges had to be crossed one person at a time. I negotiated one such bridge over rapids and advised the rest of the party to

detour. Taking the “safe” route meant climbing higher and descending a mountainside steep enough to require stabilizing ropes. By the time we reached Bare Loon Lake Camp, we had completed our second twelve-hour day in a row.

Although there were only four miles to go, it was a good thing we got off at 5 A.M. the next morning. The final challenge was SAND—soft, deep, beach sand. It was even rougher going than snow. Totally bone-weary, we were more than happy to sight the old church steeple marking the abandoned town on Lake Bennett and the train station. The ride to Skagway on the White Pass and Yukon Railroad finally gave us a chance to enjoy the majestic scenery and savor well-deserved feelings of accomplishment.

The *HUMAN PLUS* Advantage

My early interest in Ericksonian hypnosis, posthypnotic suggestion, neurolinguistic programming, and the power of mental cues led me to the *H-PLUS*® tapes and eventually to The Monroe Institute’s *LIFE SPAN 2000* program. I was particularly interested in taking charge of stress-evoking situations, performing with more efficiency, increasing physical activity, easing discomfort, and reinforcing my mental and physical health in any way possible. My work has always been stressful, and I have enough arthritis to give me some sort of pain to deal with every day. The more we conditioned for the Chilkoot hike, the worse I felt. Finally, I asked my family doctor for a fairly strong arthritis medicine that I had taken in the past and discontinued due to potential side effects. It was clear to me that I needed every advantage to pull this off, so I supplemented my conditioning with the maximum medication allowable. *HUMAN PLUS* was to be my extra edge for managing the ongoing pain, anxiety, stress, and sometimes fear (however irrational) of the ordeal.

H-PLUS Relax was my mainstay during the thirty-five-mile trip. I joked that I was pain-free each morning until the pack went on! The Plus-Relax Function Command triggered a sense of physical relaxation that actually reduced muscle pain. As we set out, I combined the Plus-Relax cue with Plus-Open (*H-PLUS Contemplation*). Every time anxiety or fear escalated, I repeated the Commands. A number of things could evoke fear and anxiety: getting so tired that I was unsure of reaching our next campsite; encountering a particularly steep or rugged stretch; traversing melting, unstable snow; navigating slippery shale on a

mountainside; and last but not least, a couple of occasions when it was hard to identify the trail. We had no guide and knew that going off in the wrong direction would get us in deep doo-doo. Plus-Relax was also the best cue for getting to sleep at night after a grueling day.

Plus-Focus (*H-PLUS Attention*) helped me locate the best foot placement on the demanding trail. Age increases the potential for fatigue and injury, so watching every step was even more important. An experienced ranger gave us the most valuable advice: remember that people who climb mountains do it one step at a time, very slowly and deliberately. I randomly used Plus-Let Go (*H-PLUS Let Go*) and Plus-Fade, Fade (*H-PLUS Off-Loading*) to release yucky feelings and thoughts, e.g., it is scary out here; there's no one to help if we get hurt; or can I really do this? We dared not allow such thoughts and feelings to linger. However, they still tended to pop in when we had walked for six or eight hours, were close to exhaustion, and still had a long way to go (usually uphill) before reaching a camp. This was particularly true on the day we attempted the summit and the following day. Doubts also rushed in whenever we gazed out over the vast terrain, apparently completely devoid of civilization.

I turned to Plus-Balance, Heal (*H-PLUS Tune-Up*), Plus-Breathe Better (*H-PLUS Lungs: Repairs and Maintenance*), Plus-Heart Better (*H-PLUS Heart: Repairs and Maintenance*), and Plus-Flow Better (*H-PLUS Circulation*) when totally "beat." My two favorite cues were Plus-Open (*H-PLUS Contemplation*) to be receptive to support from other levels and Plus-Open, Help, a Command I made up, for requesting assistance and guidance to stay safe and get the job done. As the tallest person, I frequently took point. Adjusting my stride for the rest of the party would jar me out of my trance-like state and then pain would surge in again.

The trek frequently seemed like a walking vision quest. My mixed emotions and thoughts ran the gamut. At times, the pain was so bad that I was furious about even being there. At other times, I was tired to the point of numbness. Still other times, I was awed by what the pioneers had endured during their trek across those same mountains. Such thoughts actually caused a lump in my throat and brought tears to my eyes for long periods of over several days. The intense emotion made me wonder about the whole past-life thing. The joy usually bubbled up when I realized what had been accomplished—things that were really unbelievable to Charlene and me. Deep in reverie, I would experiment with

whichever *H-PLUS* cues came to mind and invent new ones (a skill learned in *LIFE SPAN 2000*) while on the move. Turning to *H-PLUS* in stressful circumstances made all the difference by keeping my mind occupied with positives when it could easily have drowned in negativity.

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